

Outdoor Education and Environmental (Make that Nature) Learning

by Julie Johnston

Outdoor education cannot *not* be about nature learning. Just as David Orr (1992) says that all education is environmental education, so too all outdoor education teaches something about the natural world — either that it matters or that it doesn't.

According to COEO, “outdoor education directly exposes participants to our natural environment in ways that engender personal connections, knowledge, skills and a lifelong environmental [nature] ethic.” This is why outdoor educators must also see themselves as environmental educators. If you’re a ropes course expert and aficionado without a naturalist’s bone in your body, that might seem unfair. But everybody can model respectful interest in nature, think ecologically, encourage play in wild nature, use the environment as an integrated context for learning, and share the magic of natural history and nature connecting — all without any training in environmental science, and no matter where their outdoor teaching takes them.

Model Respectful Interest in Nature

Every time we’re with learners, they’re observing us, whether consciously (you know those kids!) or unconsciously. They’re taking us in, whether we mean for that to happen or not. They’re watching to see what choices we make, and noticing whether we model a nature ethic.

They see whether we’re friends with the rest of nature. Do we notice and greet the birds and animals we encounter? Do we celebrate the turning of the seasons? Do we move branches gently out of the way, as the living things they are, or let them break off? Learners listen to the language we use and the metaphors we choose (or choose to avoid). Are we still

saying things like “killing two birds with one stone”? Or is our language less violent and more nature-friendly? (There’s always “doing two things at once,” or something more poetic such as “feeding two birds from one hand.”) Do we use “the environment” (a mechanized, dead, inorganic view of the world), or “nature” (a time-honoured word connoting aliveness and beingness)?

Joseph Cornell (1998) suggests that we allow a sense of joy to permeate outdoor learning experiences, “whether in the form of gaiety or calm attentiveness.” As part of our responsibility to participants, we have to avoid giving them the impression that nature is an overly dangerous place. We can do this by teaching them how to treat nature carefully, like a friend, and by fostering biophilia, our innate affinity for life and nature.

Learners notice our ethics and attitudes in action. Is the outdoors our home and our nurturance, or merely a setting? Do we enjoy the journey, or simply hurry to the next activity site? Do we stop to pick up litter along the path or pass it by? Do we share our care and concern for the Earth (in age-appropriate ways) or communicate disinterest?

Do we talk out loud about the joy nature gives us and our appreciation for nature’s gifts? Part of our teaching practice must be to exaggerate that which we want to instil, and so we have to make a point of communicating our environmental ethic and affinity for nature.

Think Ecologically

Many outdoor education programs include icebreakers, warm-up activities, initiative tasks, cooperative games, ropes courses and other adventure elements. Helping people work

together better will almost always be a good thing, and creating a sense of community is essential for being eco-friendly. And perhaps our environmental crisis can be attributed in part to the inability of human beings (mainly in our Euro-American culture) to come up with sustainable ways of living together.

Beyond this, however, children (and adults, too) need to learn the principles of ecology (how life works), and they need to see the connections between human beings and the rest of nature. The urgent timeframe of global climate change means that any learning that doesn't contribute to these understandings could be part of the problem.

But how can we integrate environmental learning into outdoor education without drastically changing program elements, and while still contributing to group dynamics and character building? It isn't easy, but it is simple: We need to stretch what we do as outdoor educators in another direction by "ecologicalizing" outdoor education. Learning ecological principles experientially and seeing the interconnections between humans and the natural world — outdoors, whether deliberately or in passing — will be easier for learners if we set the stage for them.

Ecologicalizing outdoor education means looking for those principles and connections in all of our activities. For example, in *Sharing Nature with Children*, Joseph Cornell's ice breaker activities (which he calls "awakening enthusiasm") are all nature-related — placed-based or otherwise focused on animals and plants. Give Chuck the Chicken (I've never figured out if Chuck is a proper noun or a verb!) a miss, but try fun nature-oriented activities like Cornell's Pyramid of Life or Owls and Crows, or Rediscovery's Don't Bungle the Jungle, or Bear, Bug, Frog (Henley, 1996).

Follow-up to an initiative task that demands "group think" can lead to a discussion of behaviour of fish in schools or birds in flocks.

How did participants communicate with each other? Why? How do the strategies they came up with to meet their challenge compare with fish or birds dealing with a challenge such as a predator? (See www.ualberta.ca/~publicas/folio/44/17/front.html for a fascinating look at research in mathematical biology.)

A group activity that demands cooperation can lead to participants discussing the similarities between humans and other social animals. For example, at the Haliburton Forest and Wildlife Reserve, Rick Whitteker helps participants learn how wolf behaviour can act as a metaphor for effective group functioning, character development and leadership.

That so many roles need filling to keep someone safe on a high ropes course exemplifies the connectedness of the living web — what happens to the web of safety if one participant falls down on the job? And how does this compare with losing one species or degrading one aspect of an ecosystem? Let's talk about these things with participants.

If your outdoor education program already includes lots of hands-on nature connecting, you can highlight and reinforce ecological understandings by pointing out or asking for evidence of nature's gifts or ecosystem services in action. This could be a wonderful ambulatory activity. (For a primer on ecosystem services, see www.actionbioscience.org/environment/esa.html.)

Nature abides by rules. Games work well and reflect nature if they combine rules with cooperation and some "friendly competition" (in the sense that every individual is doing his or her best). Beware of overstressing competition — the goal, it seems, of our culture. Ecology relies on mutualism, and life relies on synergistic symbiosis. In nature, "the fittest" is the one who fits into its ecosystem best. This is a lesson our culture desperately needs to learn.

Encourage Undirected Play and Quiet Reflection in Wild Nature

As outdoor educators, how often do we allow learners to simply “be” in the natural world? More often, we believe that participants have to be supervised at all times, or “occupied” from the moment they get off the bus (or wake up in the morning) to the moment they get back on the bus (or head to bed). Got a few minutes before the bus arrives or the meal is served? Don’t fill every moment with sports or games. Let participants simply be. Let them “waste time” in a natural spot. Nature teaches us at a subconscious level.

More and more research (see for example Foster & Linney, 2007) is showing the importance of wild nature in the intellectual, physical, emotional and spiritual development and wellbeing of children (and adults). Outdoor educators have a vital role to play. For some participants, visiting a local park, naturalized school yard or outdoor education centre will be their only opportunity to spend time in a natural environment.

For young ones, “wild nature” can be a postage stamp-sized overgrown vacant lot — the wildness comes from being allowed to play



imaginatively, undirected. Older participants might appreciate a chance to just chill out in the woods, or on the fringes of a pond.

Remember that unorganized, “non-adult mediated” time is a true gift to children, stimulating positive social interactions and decreasing bullying; improving cognitive development, reasoning, observation skills and creativity; buffering the impact of stress; and instilling a sense of wonder, oneness and peace in them. An affinity for nature and a positive environmental ethic grow out of children’s regular play in the natural world (White, 2004). Whenever possible, let’s give participants — and the Earth — this gift.

Use the Environment as an Integrating Context (EIC) for Learning

Never heard of EIC? Check out the American study that showed far-reaching and encouraging benefits from this framework of interdisciplinary, collaborative, student-centred and hands-on learning (www.seer.org). The observed benefits include

- better student performance in reading, writing, math, science and social studies
- a decrease in discipline and classroom management problems
- increased engagement and enthusiasm for learning
- greater pride and ownership in accomplishments.

EIC-based learning is not simply learning about the environment or developing environmental awareness. According to *Closing the Achievement Gap* (Leiberman & Hoody, 2002), it focuses primarily on “using a school’s surroundings and community as a framework within which students can construct their own learning.” In helping education move away from compartmentalization to this comprehensive, integrated framework for learning, outdoor educators might finally have found the rationale for secure and continued funding for their programs. Outdoor learning should be seen as fundamentally important for all education.

Using EIC will also contribute to ecological literacy, as students start to see themselves as “members and citizens of the biotic community,” as Aldo Leopold once put it.

Share the Magic of Natural History and Nature Connecting

Each of us comes to outdoor education for different reasons, but it usually has something to do with peak experiences in the outdoors when we were children. Nature inspires. Share that inspiration with participants. Even if yours was a childhood adventure experience and you’re still an adrenaline junkie, there’s probably something inside that beats to the Earth’s rhythm. Think back to special times and favourite places. Where did you first feel independence? How did you build your first fort? Where did you sit with your first love? What was your first edible wild? When did you first sleep outside?

Teach less and share more, Joseph Cornell suggests: “I believe it is important for an adult to share his inner self with the child. Only by sharing our deeper thoughts and feelings do we communicate to, and inspire in others, a love and respect for the Earth.” Cornell also suggests that we be receptive, listening to the children and being alert to what nature is doing around us at any given moment. “Look and experience first; talk later,” he tells us. Encourage participants to become attuned with the natural world.

Cornell (1998) also has advice for those who can’t play “Twenty Trees” or “Twenty Birds”: “Don’t feel badly about not knowing names. The names of plants and animals are only superficial labels for what those things really are. Just as your own essence isn’t captured by your name” Avoid naming and labelling things, agrees Steve Van Matre (1990). Practise sharing and doing, rather than showing and telling. Focus on processes of life versus parts of life, “emphasizing magic and meaning instead of names and numbers.”

Natural history doesn’t have to be about facts and figures; it’s about learning that good

neighbours come in all species. Every species has its story, which is the best way to learn about life.

Conclusion — Let Nature Be the Teacher

A colleague remarked recently that with cuts to outdoor education, the disconnect of many young people from their natural environment has increased, especially in urban centres. And with cuts to environmental education, too . . . Well, it’s time for outdoor educators and environmental educators to claim their common ground and collectively call for a transformation — to make nature the teacher and the Earth matter, more than anything else in the world.

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